

# The Presidio Within the Presidio

## Historical Archeology in a NHL

For years San Francisco has celebrated its birthday on June 29 inside the walls of the Officers' Club at the Presidio of San Francisco. Believed to be the last remnant of the Spanish *presidio* or fort built over 220 years ago, the Club has always been an icon of San Francisco's history. Visitors have paused to reflect on that history while peering at the eroded adobe wall visible through a tiny window in the Club's Moraga Hall. But in all that time, few guests have realized that the history of this site's earliest days lay just below their feet.

El Presidio de San Francisco [El Presidio] was the northernmost outpost of the Spanish Empire in North America. It was established under orders of Captain Juan Bautista de Anza on July 26, 1776, by Jose Joaquin Moraga with about 200 soldiers, settlers, and their families. El Presidio was as much a community as a fort, with families of mixed indigenous Mexican, African, and Spanish descent from throughout the northern frontier of New Spain (present day Mexico). As a strategic military settlement, it eventually governed and provided security from the Sonoma/Mendocino frontier to the Monterey Bay, and from fortifications at the Golden Gate Straits to the wild hinterlands of the Central Valley, including seven Franciscan Missions and two civil settlements, all before 1846.

El Presidio was built as a quadrangle about 85 yards on a side. Surrounded by a palisade, the complex was built by a squad of 20 sailors and two carpenters who focussed their energy on three key structures: the commandant's quarters, a warehouse for provisions, and a chapel. This was the extent of the complex. Settlers and their families were left to build their own homes, which are referred to in the record as *chozas* [huts] of *jacal* [branch and mud] or *palisado* [upright poles or timbers] construction with *azotea* [flat roofs] with *zacate* [straw] coverings.

Designed to defend Spain's territory, the Presidio community struggled to fulfill its role while also facing constant challenges presented by the environment. Historical documents suggest that El Presidio was in an almost constant state of disrepair, reconstruction, and collapse. By 1792, El Presidio was described as a quadrangle of palisade, adobe, and stone buildings about 106 by 110 yards, with no buildings on the eastern side. The construction and layout of El Presidio remains enigmatic after this date.

When the United States seized Alta California in 1846, much of El Presidio lay in ruins. U.S. troops used intact adobe buildings as a headquarters and barracks from the 1850s until the 1906 earthquake. In fact, El Presidio's central plaza remained the main parade ground until the Post was redesigned in the late 1890s. The landscape of the Spanish colonial period remains today in the parking area demarked by Pershing Square, Moraga Avenue and the Officers Club, and the southern half of the Funston Avenue Officers Quarters.

*A view of the Spanish Presidio archeological site during the 1996 test trenching to verify results of ground penetrating radar work. The building on the right is the Officers' Club. The entire parking area is part of the original central plaza of the Spanish Presidio, and also the main parade ground during the American period until the 1890s.*



The Presidio of San Francisco was originally designated a National Historic Landmark on June 13, 1962. At that time, the property was identified through a thematic study of sites associated with Spanish colonial exploration and settlement. It was secondarily recognized for its long military occupation by the United States Army after 1846.

*Photos by the author.*

The only historic resource identified in 1962 was the Officers' Club, which was reputed to contain adobe fabric from its original use as the Spanish commandant's quarters during the 18th century.

Public perception of the Presidio NHL continued to evolve through the 1970s, and with each new study more contributing historic properties were identified on this 1,480-acre military reservation. The number of significant buildings and structures rose from one in 1962, to 277 in 1976, to 400 in 1981, and most recently reached 662 or



*Cabrillo College's 1996 archeological field school site between an 1880s Officers' Quarters (on the left) and the Officers' Club. Remains of one of the Spanish Presidio chapels from either 1784 or 1817 were found here.*

more sites in 1992. During much of this time, the value of El Presidio was forgotten and became secondary to a growing interest in the post-1846 history of the U.S. Army Presidio.

Beginning with the 1992 re-study of the Presidio NHL conducted through the Western Regional Office of the National Register Programs, historic archeological resources had their first opportunity to be recognized as contributing elements of the Presidio district. The 1992 re-study of the Presidio NHL included a predictive model for historical archeological sites that would contribute to the values of the Landmark.

A predictive sites model was chosen for the following reasons:

1. The Presidio has a complex history of physical change that masked much of its archeological remains, impeding archeological site identification by pedestrian survey;
2. Similar to other NHLs with archeological components, little funding existed to conduct either remote sensing or excavations to identify and clarify the integrity of these resources;
3. Substantial primary historical documentation existed to analyze, locate, and map key areas where archeological sites and features would occur; and

4. Previous historic archeological studies on similar military sites provide testable patterns of land use and archeological feature locations that could be incorporated into the Presidio's predictive model.

The resulting predictive model was incorporated into the General Management Plan Amendment for the Presidio within Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and was, significantly, adopted by the U.S. Army and the Corps of Engineers (COE). They continued to conduct major land disturbing projects through the period of Army-to-NPS transition and will continue to do so as hazardous material remediation continues for several years to come. Both the Corps of Engineers and the NPS use this model to make decisions about project monitoring, test excavations, and special needs in identified archeological zones.

The use of the predictive model paid off substantially in June 1993, when Barb Voss and Vance Bente of Woodward Clyde Consultants located stone foundations from the Spanish colonial El Presidio while monitoring the removal of a fuel oil storage tank behind a row of 1860s Officers' Quarters. Although the monitoring was originally designed to watch for archeological remains associated with the Officers' Quarters, the discovery and the next two years of monitoring waterline construction, sewer line repairs, and specially focussed excavations arranged through the Army and the Corps of Engineers resulted in major contributions to our knowledge of this Spanish colonial site. In 1995, test excavations directed by park archeologists Leo Barker and Martin Mayer uncovered additional subsurface features on the southern side of the site, including discovery of collapsed adobe walls under an 1880 officers quarters.

Partnering has been a major method of accomplishing many of the potentially costly goals of researching and developing El Presidio. During the transition of the military reservation to NPS stewardship, the COE, Army, and the NPS pooled resources and contracted with Woodward Clyde Consultants to test assumptions about the layout of the Presidio site using ground penetrating radar, and ground truthing through hand and machine excavation.

Since 1995, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area has embarked on a long-range archeological and historical research project on El Presidio. It includes an annual archeological field school funded through the Golden Gate National Park Association, and conducted through the Archeological Technology Program of Cabrillo College in Aptos, California. The field school, directed jointly between Robert Edwards and

*Cabrillo College students and volunteers peer over and sort the archeological residue from each stratum after it is water screened through 1/8" mesh and dried.*

Charr Simpson-Smith of Cabrillo College, and Leo Barker, is currently examining one of El Presidio's numerous chapel sites. The school was selected because it is the only certification program in California which produces archeological technicians proficient in detailed stratigraphic excavation techniques, and incorporates a public education element into its field work. While achieving park goals regarding archeological resource identification, conservation, and interpretation, educational goals set in the Presidio General Management Plan are also being met. Visitors can see, feel, and reflect on the European origins of San Francisco and much of the settlement of central California.

The growing archeological program also includes contributions from Golden Gate staff, the National Americorps program, San Francisco Conservation Corps, Boy Scouts of America, and interested volunteers. A historic community reconstruction project has begun with history students from the University of San Francisco, which is computerizing the genealogy of El Presidio's Spanish and Mexican period occupants. They have begun to research the Russian, English, American, and Peruvian companies and manifests of trade which will facilitate archeological work and help build a more complete social and economic history of the site and region. Anthropology students from the University of California at Berkeley will begin an intensive survey this summer to identify "outlier" sites reflecting the growth of El Presidio outside its initial quadrangle in the early 1800s. San Francisco State University will also be conducting remote sensing in the form of ground penetrating radar, magnetometry, and resistivity surveys of both El Presidio and the outlying survey areas. The resulting synergy is positive, strong, and growing.

So what have we discovered? The results of the 1996 field work at El Presidio include several new discoveries. At least two distinct construction episodes have been found. One appears to coincide with the roughly 106 x 110 yard square composed of a central plaza surrounded by single pile buildings of *adobe* or *jacal* as identified in the 1792 report of Acting Commandant Hermengildo Sal and corroborated by visiting Captain George Vancouver. The other is a stone foundation approximately 2.5 times larger than the 1792 plan,



and not referenced in the existing historical documents. Current interpretations place construction of this larger quadrangle in 1815 under the direction of Captain Luis Antonio Arguello.

Other discoveries include additional foundations over 100' outside the western side of the quadrangle, which are either from defensive walls or large corrals of the early-19th century and may represent implementation of designs prepared in 1795-96 but refused by the royal government. Foundations, remnant interior wall plaster, and a silver crucifix have helped identify one of El Presidio's chapels on the southern side of the plaza. Excavations within the central plaza show a busy community or village center, not the austere, groomed, ceremonial parade ground of the American period. Remodeling of the Officers' Club in 1934 actually encapsulated an entire adobe building including its roof and floors. Since the building is the largest remnant of Spanish military architecture in California, remote and non-destructive archeological testing will be conducted to determine the original structure's layout and construction, as well as its development into modern times.

It has become apparent that El Presidio's archeological remains cover a broader area than any historic documents or maps suggested, and will require substantial study to clarify, interpret, and develop ways of managing this historical site. There is much to be learned and joint historical and archeological research will provide the best opportunity for enhancing public understanding of the Presidio within the Presidio of San Francisco.

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